In the End, God
I Corinthians 15:51-58
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Unlike the sermons you and millions of other Christians are going to hear this morning, the most exquisite articulation of the Easter Gospel I have ever experienced was brief, to the point and included no words at all. It occurred at the conclusion of a television documentary several years ago, The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich. The editors and compilers of what was a massive amount of information must have pondered long hours before deciding on an appropriate conclusion. They chose wisely, for I have never forgotten it. They had probed the depths of Nazi terror, they had investigated and recorded every detail of that ghastly phenomenon, they had looked honestly and completely at the unbelievable horrors of the extermination camps, and the searching eye of the camera came to rest finally on a barrack wall in one of the concentration compounds - the "Children's Camp". Through its gates had come 15,000 young Jewish children. 12,000 of them were executed. On the walls of the barracks were found childish pictures, drawn carefully during idle hours, pictures of butterflies and birds, and flowers, little girls jumping rope, houses with chimneys, sun, moon and stars - all the things which mean life and love to little people and big people too. As I watched that sequence I thought I had never seen anything so utterly sad in my life. I cannot forget it - and the reason is that there was majesty in it, irrepressible joy which transformed what should have been a symbol of the power of evil and death into a symbol of hope. There was more of the truth about God and life and humanity in those scribbled pictures of butterflies than in all the horror of the gas chambers. That is the Gospel of Easter.

We are here to acknowledge it, think about it, deal with it as best we can, and celebrate it this morning. Simply stated, the Christian claim is that Jesus of Nazareth died but overcame death, and because of that death has lost its ultimate power. Now that is either true and therefore the most awesomely important fact in all of human history, or it is one of history's cruelest jokes.

Where to begin our thinking? Historically, there are two facts with which we must come to terms. First, Jesus was dead. There is no serious academic debate about that. There is no reason to believe that the whole story is a fabrication that somehow survived the refining skepticism of history. Even non-believers concede that there is no reason to doubt that He came to Jerusalem, was arrested, tried and crucified. Once we proceed to that point, Roman efficiency takes over. It is inconceivable that they botched the job: curcifixion was designed to kill a man, slowly to be sure, but thoroughly nevertheless. When they took Him down from the cross He was dead. His closest friends knew it and began to behave as if the end had come. One of the most convincing bits of data, as far as I'm concerned, is that the Gospel writers, telling the story perhaps forty to seventy years after the fact, had every opportunity to embellish it in order to make themselves and the disciples look good. It would have been easy to portray the disciples simply waiting in the vicinity of the tomb to greet the risen Christ. They didn't take that opportunity and the only reason I can think of for their negligence is that the truth was widely known in the early church. The disciples and friends of Jesus were devastated by the crucifixion. If they had expected a resurrection they surely would have behaved differently. What they did, in fact, was hide. With His death, the hope they had experienced died as well. His teaching was exposed as naive: how, after all do you inherit the earth when you are hanging from a cross? His love was terribly exposed as weakness: He had turned the other cheek and look what it got Him. The fact is, Jesus was dead and the disciples devastated. The picture is one of a small group of people cowering behind a locked door, fearful for their own lives, waiting for the opportunity to sneak out of the city and back to their fishing boats in Galilee.

The second fact is that sometime early on Sunday morning they started to believe that He didn't remain dead. They not only believed it as an academic proposition - "suppose Jesus is still alive" - they went out and died for it. That is another fact. Something so incredible happened to the disciples that they burst out of their hiding place and turned the whole history of the world upside down, as no men before or since have done.

The in-between time is not very clear. There were no NBC cameras there covering the events as they unfolded. The four Gospels tell the story - differently. The accounts are in conflict, there is a monumental amount of confusion, people running back and forth, alternately crying and laughing, arguing and shouting. Wisely, the early chroniclers didn't even try to portray the act of resurrection: they pay no attention at all to the physiological curiosity of the whole matter. They point, simply, to an open and empty tomb - and to the new and unexpected power they experienced.

Presbyterian theologian James Smart, who will be in this pulpit on May 1, writes eloquently, "Take away the resurrection and each of the Gospels will seem to lose the cement that holds it together. The light will go out and leave only a rather pitiful deluded Jewish Rabbi, with some very wonderful insights into life, trudging briefly along a road that ends abruptly at the cross." (The Creed in Christian Teaching,p 150-1)

The facts, then, are two. Jesus was dead - and forty-odd hours later people began to believe that He was alive, a few people at first but soon hundreds and thousands, and hundreds of thousands and countless millions. Why not leave it at that; two established facts? Why not listen to the cold logic of the intellect and conclude that we are here dealing with sublime symbolism; that the truth of Jesus' teaching lived after Him; that the beauty of His example is immortal?

The reason is that our humanity is more than intellectual: we are not mind alone; we are also heart. The human brain is not and never has been the sole arbiter of truth. The philosopher Pascal, an enlightened, eminently rational man, wrote,"The heart has its own reasons which the reason does not know." And once exposed and expressed the reasons of the heart seem always to focus on one question above all others - the question of death. "I have immortal longings in me," Shakespeare wrote. The Polish anthropoligist Malinowski observed, "Nothing really matters except the answer to the burning question, 'Am I going to live or shall I vanish like a bubble?' " (In The Christian Agnostic, Weatherhead, p. 252). And Immanuel Kant's third great philosophic question was just this, "What may I hope for?"

Churches are full on Easter morning, a phenomenon which has been attributed to fashion, social custom, cultural tradition. But I've never been comfortable with that easy and sometimes self-righteous assessment. People are more honest than that. The Easter Parade died several decades ago, a happy demise, I submit. I think people come to church on Easter because what is said, sung and celebrated touches something primal in everyone of us. The resurrection of Jesus Christ touches something in us that is every bit as real as our intellects! "Am I going to live or shall I vanish like a bubble?" "Immortal longings?" - not really. H.G.Wells grandly announced that the human appetite for immortality was merely an extension of petty egotism: we could not bear the thought of the world going on without us. He was wrong. My experience is that any immortal longings we have are called out of us by love, not selfishness. I dare to believe that we are never closer to what God intended than when we love, and it is when our love it assaulted by death that everything in our being rebels.

In my experience, our refusal to accept the finality of death has nothing to do with selfishness and everything in the world to do with love. And we are never nobler, bigger and better human beings than when we put a foot down and say "no"; and come to church on Easter morning to sing and shout it.

Yet over against that dearest longing of the human heart is a reality which will not be denied by daffodils and lilies and Easter bunnies. Life is full of it. We are reminded of it daily - those fateful giant airliners full of happy vacationers are grim evidence that we live in its presence, always. One of the year's best sellers is Gail Sheehy's Passages, a survey of predictable life-crises through which we all must go. The book begins with the author covering the violent events in Northern Ireland, standing beside a young man who is killed in her presence by a sniper's bullet. The experience set seomthing off in her which resulted in the writing ot the book. "As we reach midlife...we become susceptible to the idea of our own perishability. Each of us stumbles onto the reality of our own death between 35 and 45." (p.5).

What does life mean in lieu of its end? Is there anything lasting? Anything ultimate and true and beautiful in view of its termination? Are we, as the psalmist suggested, like grass which flourishes in the morning and withers in the evening, and then is no more? If you are alive, you have asked that. If you are sensitive you have been troubled by it. If you are in love, you think a great deal about it.

You are not alone. The most eloquent expression of human despair I know is in Macbeth:

> "Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow,
> Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
> To the last syllable of recorded time,
> And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
> The way to dusty death. Out, out brief candle!
> Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
> That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
> And then is heard no more: it is a tale
> Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
> Signifying nothing." (Act 5, Scene 5, line 19).

Gloomy Shakespeare said it poetically, and every one of us has felt it personally. The philosophers and theologians know that death is not simply an event in the future which we hope to forestall as long as possible through good medicine and good luck. It is a power, a reality with which we have dialogue every day. Karl Barth called it, not the last enemy, but the ever-present enemy. We live under its authority. It affects everything we do. We may have immortal longings and come to church on Easter morning, but we live in the presence of the power of death.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ, with the resurrection at its center, takes that very seriously. Ours is no naive dogma that tries to deny or disguise the reality of death. The Bible is terribly realistic, and does not call death by any name but its own. Death and Sin, in the Bible, are cohorts which constantly threaten life. The cross of Jesus Christ is the symbol of the worldly power of death. Jesus died - the result of a conspiracy of petty, frightened, self-seeking politicians and ecclesiastical officials. Death is that real and contemporary. The disciples stood in front of a cross and their faith fled, and their courage and their hope. Death was supreme. Then - and only then - the resurrection broke in on them.

So you and I must take that same road. We must acknowledge that evil is real: that wars continue to happen: that little children die: that accidents occur: that death and its works are always present. We must, that is to say, stand beneath a cross, and know that life can do this. I'm not sure that you can ever celebrate Easter unless you have also observed Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. I'm not sure the resurrection can be anything but a pleasant myth until you have confronted the reality of evil and death.

But if you do that: if you can be honest and acknowledge that there are no answers: that death seems to have the last laugh: that Thomas Huxley was right much of the time when he suggested that there is no immediate evidence that God is love: if you are strong enough to empty yourself of both the logic of the intellect and the reasons of heart and to throw yourself onto the mercy of God who is sovereign, I believe the resurrection will burst in upon you - just as the Risen Christ appeared suddenly in the midst of those dejected, despairing people twenty centruies ago.

I'm not at all sure that this celebration has much substance apart from last Thursday and Friday. I'm not at all sure that resurrection means anything until you are honest about death. I am positively sure that Easter is among the emptiest of rituals when isolated from the rest of life. Because what it means is that you are living in a world in which the power of death has been defeated: a world in which life is infinitely worth living and in which the permanent realities are love and joy and kindness and laughter, not grief and selfishness and greed and crying. It means that justice and integrity are worth your commitment: that the struggles of our life have permanent value: that nothing we do or care about or love is ever lost.

I like very much the way the 15th chapter of I Corinthians ends. St. Paul was writing to a group of early Christians, who, I deduce, had asked some very difficult questions. They wanted to know about the resurrection, about its meaning and implications, about their lives and prospects in light of it. Paul wrote before any of the Gospels were in existence - before anyone else had written an account of what transpired. The passage is, therefore, of tremendous importance: Paul was describing his experience of the resurrection without the benefit of the written accounts. In a lengthy treatise he deals with the centrality of the resurrection and the fact that because Christ is raised, His people can expect to share in the resurrection. Near the end is a magnificent passage which is read at nearly every funeral and with which we ordinarily close the book. "O Death, where is thy sting...Thanks be to God who gives us the victory." But St. Paul went on abruptly; "Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain."

Every time I read that I am surprised by it: by the breathless transition from glorious theology, inspiring affirmation, to the rather modest advice to his readers: "stay with it: be strong: don't budge: your modest little lives are worth something _ something ultimate and eternal - because Jesus Christ has risen."

That's the best news of all. Death is the great "no" to us, to our hopes and dreams and loves and struggles. But the resurrection of Jesus Christ is a resounding "yes": God's yes. It is a butterfly on the wall of a concentration camp: a flower peeping out of the snow: in the end, not death, but God.

How silly to assume that we will understand it. We spend most of our time asking the wrong questions - What happened to the body? Who moved the stone? - scientific, twentieth century questions. "Lo," St. Paul announced, "I show you a mystery." Not, "I am going to explain this to you so that you have no more questions." We can listen to a hundred Easter sermons and read every word ever written on the subject and never have it down precisely.

What we must do to celebrate this day is listen with both mind and heart:

O death, where is thy sting?
O death, where is thy victory?
Thanks be to God, who gives us
the victory in Jesus Christ our Lord.

And hearing that, live steadfastly, immovably. Jesus Christ is Risen. Alleluia.

Eternal God, our Father, words are not adequate to contain our gratitude for this day. Accept our praise and thanksgiving: our love and hope - through Jesus Christ our Lord who was dead but is alive for evermore.

Amen.